Public Meeting
High Speed Rail Feasibility and Planning Study
Lowell, Massachusetts

February 11, 2002

A public meeting to discuss the Boston to Montreal High Speed Rail feasibility and planning study was held on February 11, 2002 at the Lowell Regional Transit Authority Operations Center Community Meeting Room at 100 Hale Street. Members of the public attending the meeting included regional planners, transit advocates, interested citizens, politicians, and a representative from the Government of Quebec. Siobhan Norton-Perenick and Donna Hill, both of the Massachusetts Executive Office of Transportation and Construction (EOTC), and Scott Bascom of the Vermont Agency of Transportation (VTrans) were at the meeting representing their state's participation in the study.

Prior to the formal presentation, an open house welcomed the public providing them with the opportunity to view informative displays and study materials, meet the study team, and discuss the study with team members.

The study's project manager, Ron O'Blenis of Parsons Brinckerhoff Quade & Douglas, Inc. (PB), opened the meeting welcoming those in attendance. PB was identified by Mr. O'Blenis as the lead firm providing planning services on the study.

Mr. O'Blenis introduced Scott Bascom, project manager for VTrans and Steering Committee representative. Mr. Bascom provided a description of the study's partnership between Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Vermont as well as their coordination with the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA). He also described the financing of the study, with half of the $400,000 cost being funded by the FRA and the remaining $200,000 being paid by an equal split between the three states.

Mr. O'Blenis moderated the remainder of the meeting. He gave an overview of the study indicating that its purpose is to determine if there is sufficient demand and benefit to build a high speed rail service between Boston and Montreal. He indicated that the study would be looking at several issues - grade crossings, opportunities for multiple use and international cooperation; however, the major emphasis of Phase I of the study would be projecting ridership - "If we build it, who will ride it?"

Mr. O'Blenis described the methodology in the study to assess ridership. He explained that a model will be developed by Cambridge Systematics, Inc. (CS) with variables including frequency and timing of trains as well as cost. He indicated that CS will conduct surveys at bus stations, airports and the Hooksett, NH tool booth to determine

existing travel patterns along the corridor. In addition to assessing potential ridership, Mr. O'Blenis said that the feasibility study will also perform an inventory of safety issues, evaluate the existing infrastructure, identify governmental issues, and develop a train performance calculation (TPC) model. Mr. O'Blenis explained that the TPC model would evaluate travel times under three scenarios and gave a brief description of the process.

Mr. O'Blenis indicated that the team will be ready to report its findings to the public by earlySeptember 2002.

After Mr. O'Blenis' presentation, he invited participation from the audience. He asked the attendees to provide their definition of "high speed rail." Responses included:

- clean and comfortable
- over 120 miles per hour
- attractive, streamlined look
- limited number of stops
- frequent service
- limited or no freight service
- faster than the posted speed limit
- faster than a car, slower than a plane and not the price of a Concorde

Mr. O'Blenis informed the participants that all of their answers fit the definition of high speed rail. He referenced the definition of high speed rail as shown on the study website:

High-speed rail (HSR) is self-guided intercity passenger ground transportation that is time-competitive with air and/or auto on a door-to-door basis for trips in the approximate range of 100 to 500 miles. This is a market-based, not a speed-based, definition: it recognizes that the opportunities and requirements for HSR differ markedly among different pairs of cities.

Mr. O'Blenis stated that based on this definition, each of the answers provided by the public was correct.

Discussion then proceeded on a number of diverse topics in an informal question and answer session. These topics included:

- Will the evaluation of the speed of the trains include implementation of advanced equipment, like what is being worked on for the Acela service?
- How will the study address the effects of the service on business, both in the United States and Canada?
- Where will the stations be located? How many stops are proposed along the route?

- Is it possible to alter the alignment of the corridor to provide better access to airports?
- Can the study address tourism and quantify the benefits to the region in its marketing efforts to European and Japanese tourists?
- Will the service be established with a recreational mindset, with a train set that allows storage of bicycles and ski equipment?

Mr. O'Blenis noted that many of these issues would be identified, but not resolved in this phase of the study. He reiterated that Phase I will focus on basic market analysis - what is the market demand and can high speed rail meet that need?

Mr. O'Blenis was asked about the role of Amtrak in the study. He responded that Amtrak was not a direct participant in the study and an assumption was not being made that Amtrak would be the service provider should the rail system be built.

An attendee recommended the small section of Massachusetts that was shown on the study map be expanded to show more of the state, especially since the train would service people south of Boston.

Also discussed was elevation of the tracks and platforms as a way to significantly reduce dwell time at stations and make the train more time competitive.

Mr. O'Blenis was asked why the proposed study route was selected and would the study look at a more geographically direct route to Montreal? He indicated that the route was selected for three reasons:

1. Linkage to regional population centers.
2. There is an existing right of way throughout the entire corridor.
3. The route would connect with other rail services - the northeast corridor service from Washington to Montreal and the Adirondacks service in New York.

A comment was made regarding the issue in New Hampshire between Concord and White River Junction, Vermont where there is no rail and active recreational use occurs along the corridor. Mr. O'Blenis indicated the study team was aware of the Rails to Trails organization and have kept them informed of the study.

Concern was raised about the need to work out a procedure at the Canadian border so that inspection by customs does not create long delays. It was suggested the team look at how this process was handled at western train borders in British Columbia and Washington State where crossing occurs without delays. Scott Bascom mentioned that the study will look at the Pacific Northwest Corridor for direction on this issue.

There were many comments about the economic benefits from having a high speed rail service. Peter Roudebush of Cambridge, MA said he thought it was "terribly important to identify the benefits to local people, not just the people passing through." Another attendee pointed out that tourism is the universal industry of New England and that we

bring many people to the region but do not provide enough alternatives of getting them around once they arrive here. Some saw the train service as an opportunity to promote smart growth, agricultural exchange and connect communities. Peter Roudebush commented that "the ultimate success of the project will not be ridership, but the overall impact on the region."

Donald LeBlanc, a representative of the Government of Quebec (Boston office), expressed an interest in the high speed rail service as an economic stimulator between the two countries. He described Boston and Montreal as two metropolitan areas with similar profiles: a population of 3 million people, a high concentration of high tech jobs and students, a good quality of life and tourism.

The question was raised regarding what happens when Phase I is complete? Mr. O'Blenis indicated that another public meeting would be held in September 2002 to present the findings of the study. If justified, the study would then proceed to Phase II. Scott Bascom indicated that the FRA has stringent guidelines that must be met for the study to proceed into Phase II. However, discussions with congressional delegates are already underway to provide funding for Phase II should the conclusion of Phase I recommend further study of service for the corridor. Mr. O'Blenis emphasized that the public should understand that Phase I of the study may indicate there will not be sufficient justification to build the new high speed rail corridor.

The meeting was then closed by Mr. O'Blenis, with the invitation to continue the discussion with the team if the public had more questions and comments. Many attendees took advantage of the offer. Mr. O'Blenis also reminded those present to keep informed on the study and provide feedback to the team via the study's website, www.bostonmontrealhsr.org.

To read a more detailed summary of the other regional meetings use the links below.

- Overall Summary
- Lowell, Massachusetts
- Concord, New Hampshire
- Montpelier, Vermon